

# PUBLIC HEALTH REPORT

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## Drug Abuse—Now a Community Problem

DRUG ABUSE, especially among young people, has become a serious public health problem in California. The use of marijuana, hallucinogens and amphetamines by youths in all economic and social classes can be characterized as "epidemic." Standard approaches, which were developed to deal primarily with use of opium derivatives, and relying heavily upon penal sanctions, are not the answers to the new and growing drug abuse problem.

Here are some of the factors which make drug abuse a matter of concern to both the state and local public health departments and the medical community throughout California: (1) the inherent dangers to health resulting from misuse of drugs; (2) the extensiveness of the problem within the population, particularly the youth; (3) the "spreading" nature of recent drug abuse fads; (4) the reluctance of patients with illness directly or indirectly associated with drugs to seek medical care; (5) the hazardous practice of self-treatment or treatment by unqualified persons for problems associated with drug abuse; and (6) the association of drug abuse with certain communicable diseases, particularly hepatitis, venereal diseases, and tuberculosis.

There are serious problems connected with proper medical care for drug users. Many of the young patients who need medical attention boycott

existing medical facilities either as a part of their rejection of "The Establishment," or out of mistrust and fear of prosecution for illegal traffic in drugs. Consequently, those cases which do come to physicians are likely to be severe, refractory or complicated and the patients themselves may have negative attitudes. In any event the most favorable time for treatment usually has passed by the time the patient comes under treatment.

Some private practitioners are confused about the legalities of treating drug users, and; believing some reporting system is entailed, prefer "not to become involved." Present state laws apply only to narcotics users, although some cities have local ordinances that require reporting of other drug users.

There may be a problem of paying for medical care, and existing "special" or "free" clinics may be insufficient to carry the load in areas of hippie colonies. Two such special clinics, established to meet the peculiar needs of the unorthodox groups are the Haight-Ashbury Medical Clinic in San Francisco, where about 100 private practitioners give volunteer services to patients who will not or cannot go elsewhere for help, and the Free Clinic in Los Angeles, where similar services are provided.

The need for medical care of a kind that will be accepted is particularly urgent, considering the large number of persons with medical problems associated with various forms of drug abuse. Treatment offered at present consists usually of little more than detoxification and does not provide for long-term follow-up and rehabilitation services. Early case finding is essential for best results of treatment. Lack of community treatment facilities for acute reactions associated with drug abuse has resulted in a dangerous pattern of self-treatment

which, in most instances, means that one form of drug abuse is merely added onto another.

We urgently need information for appropriate preventive approaches to the problem. This includes development and evaluation of improved health-oriented educational programs, for students as well as adults. Expanded efforts are also needed to measure the prevalence of drug abuse; to determine what groups are at high risk of becoming drug abusers; to discover the patterns of drug usage among high-risk groups—as well as within the

entire population—and to determine the long-term effects of drug abuse.

Many agencies, public and private, have focused on the problem. However, their specific interests preclude a comprehensive approach, and result in extensive fragmentation of effort. The Department's primary responsibility is to assist in the mobilization of existing resources to find the nature, extent and causes of drug abuse, and then to draw together a comprehensive approach to the prevention, early detection and treatment.

